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A NOTE ON FLORIDITY

By W. J. HENDERSON

FLORID singing has passed through some vicissitudes. It is now viewed as a parade of vocal dexterity which has no inner artistic significance, and at best can excite no finer emotion than astonishment. This attitude has become so fixed that many fragile musical spirits are wounded by the singing of a trill in the music of sober Hans Sachs, although the archaic purport of the passage should be self evident. They are shocked again when a trill appears in the passage designed to proclaim the ebullient temperament of the laughing Valkyr. These stern Catos of the voice would banish all such vocal blossoms which, in their minds, are indistinguishable from Marguerite de Valois' paper flowers of song.

Nevertheless, the florid element has a firm and clearly planned æsthetic basis. It began in the regions of spiritual utterance. It was not transformed into empty coloratura singing till the singers had achieved their conquest of the lyric drama and set their feet upon the necks of the composers. Before that time floridity had at least its indisputable decorative value. Most genuine art has decorative quality. This, however, is too often snubbed by academic criticism, which is prone to concentrate its gaze on structural logic, thematic derivations, and other musical factors addressing themselves more directly to the powers of ratiocination.

If the scholars would more frequently and affectionately contemplate the purely emotional moods of music they would become convinced that even in this twentieth century florid song need not entirely relinquish its pristine search after a method of expression for thoughts not to be framed in words. And whenever this special and lofty employment of the florid element in vocal music cannot be utilized, the musician may still follow the practise of the first opera composers, who found it a vehicle to carry a combination of decoration and expression.

The history of florid song has been recounted in many places, but the connection between certain of its phases has not always been clearly pointed out. Certainly no great emphasis has been laid on the fact that in the first years of the development of

modern music by the church the use of florid phrases with texts was governed by an impulse similar to that which the Egyptians had when they glorified their gods with long flourishes on open vowel sounds.

More than two centuries before the Christian era Demetrius Phalereus had noted that the Egyptian priests did this. A little later Nichomachus gravely informs us that the seven planets each produce a certain sound and that the priests in their worship invoked their divinities with inarticulate tones and without consonants. The purpose, the author informs us, was to propitiate the genii who inhabit the stars of our system. The singing of the proper vowel set in vibration the necessary waves.

It is inessential to trace the numerous steps joining the ancient Egyptian music with that of the church. The Greeks borrowed the custom of carolling in honor of the gods, and the influence of Greek ideas on early Christian music is known to all students. But the adoption of the intent of florid song has been overlooked. Surrounded by the florid music of the orient, and, as we should suppose, inclined to shun this type of vocal utterance as unsuited to the solemn ritual of the new religion, we find that on the contrary the fathers soon admitted florid song to the sanctuary and that in its earliest phases it stands very close to that of ancient Egypt.

The infant church had two principal liturgies. That of Alexandria and neighboring Egypt was arranged by St. Mark. That of Jerusalem was prepared by St. James, the brother of Christ and the second bishop of the city. In both of these liturgies the Greek invocation, "Kyrie eleison," appears as a congregational response. In the Judean liturgy we find also the Hebrew exclamation, "Alleluia."

Of course, we have no record of the music which these oriental congregations employed in their kyries and alleluias. But historical evidence of a little later date justifies the inference that in the beginning the syllabic chant performed its normal function in delivering the utterances of the priest, while a less rigid and more vocal manner was chosen for the responses of the people. This latitude of musical utterance widened till the song became too difficult for the congregation, whereupon the singing of the responses, as well as other parts of the service, was transferred to a choir of trained singers. That the employment of extended musical treatment of the explanatory texts did not therefore cease must be manifest. Rather did the elaboration of the florid kyries and alleluias continue.

The latest authoritative studies of this subject are those of M. Amédée Gastoué, professor of chant in the Schola Cantorum, of Paris. His first summary of it is found in his "*L'Art Grégorien*." To set forth his points briefly, the books of Roman chant which have come down to us show a distinct unity of character. We have not many manuscripts, but the fidelity with which they were reproduced from the second half of the eighth to the ninth century assures us that we possess the chants of the Gregorian antiphonary in the form which they had acquired at that period. Can we go back further—perhaps to Gregory himself? Most probably, for beside the unity of tradition, which is demonstrated, we have a criterion in the chants themselves.

Internal criticism reveals differences of style in certain chants. We know that in the second half of the seventh century some chants were added to the primitive Gregorian repertory. Now, when we come upon chants revealing a style of a period anterior to these, we are justified in believing that they were preserved in their authentic form, a form guarded piously by the Roman Schola Cantorum and attributed by it to its founder, Gregory.

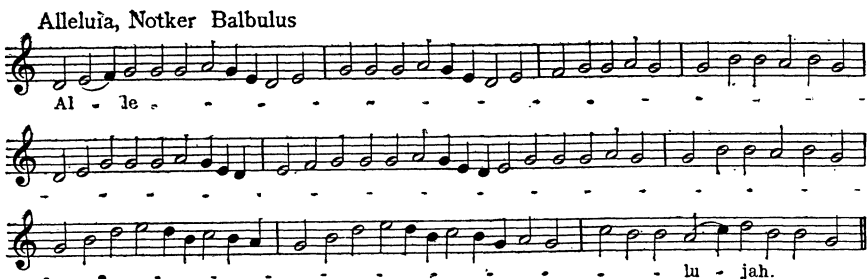
At a considerably later date, writing his masterly articles in his "*Encyclopédie de la Musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire*," the same author states more definitely his conviction that we have in our possession not alone chants of the Gregorian period, but some of even earlier origin. After profound study of the liturgy of Milan, M. Gastoué is convinced that some of the Ambrosian chants are preserved in its books. He says:

The character of the Ambrosian melodies, approaching the Gallican and Roman style, is nevertheless wholly individual. The matter can be summed up briefly thus: in comparison with the Gregorian chant the simple melodies are very simple and the ornate ones very ornate. The simple chants have in general much charm: the luxuriant vocalises, on the other hand, do not present the artistic distinction which the Roman melodies ordinarily show. The study of the Ambrosian repertory is of puissant interest when one compares it with the Roman. In effect the liturgy of Milan has preserved a sufficient number of pieces which one finds again in the Gregorian ritual, pieces going back to the formation of these repertories. The Milanese chant gives us these pieces in their original state, often defaced, while the Roman presents them in an elaborate artistic form, or in the shape of a variation of the same theme.





While the conclusions of M. Gastoué are not identical with those of M. Gevaert in his well-known work on the ancient chant, they agree wholly with them in one vital matter, to wit: that we possess certain chants in their early forms and that from them we gain some substantial knowledge of the character of Christian church music in its childhood; for when we reach Ambrose we touch the last years of the fourth century. From this time, then, we may trace the progress of floridity in vocal music and determine its two-fold quality of emotional expression and artistic decoration. The attitude of the church toward the use of long flourishes on vowels is clearly defined in the remarks of St. Augustine on the *jubili*. "He who jubilates does not utter any words, but a joyous sound without words; for it is the spirit lost in joy, expressing it with all its power, but not arriving at a definition of its sense." Readers of musical history are acquainted with the state into which the floridity of ecclesiastic music had developed by the middle of the tenth century, particularly in the famous school of St. Gall. We may quote here two examples merely for the purpose of refreshing the memory:



In the formative period of the lyric drama, which became the promised land for floridity, both secular and religious music

were potent influences. The secular music itself, despite its transformation into "*musica ficta*" by the employment of the leading note, adopted the airs and graces of floridity from ecclesiastic music. The researches of Pierre Aubry and Johann B. Beck have proved conclusively that the troubadours were mostly trained musicians, educated in the abbeys and in the courses followed by the young men preparing to take holy orders. The vital departure of the troubadour composers was their adoption of the vernacular instead of Latin for their texts and the consequent substitution of rhythm for quantity.

The troubadours played a very important rôle in the development of the "*Ars Nova*," as mensural music came to be called in Italy. Johannes Wolf, of Berlin, has written a monumental work, "*Geschichte der Mensuralnotation*," the fruit of many years of laborious research in European libraries. This book demonstrates beyond doubt that French and Italian composition from the middle of the thirteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth had made much greater progress than historians formerly believed. Secular music was moving steadily forward along the path opened by the troubadours and we continually find evidence of the use of floridity both for expressive and decorative purposes. Here is one example which will throw light on the matter.

From *Quant le Rossignol* by the Chatelaine de Coucy (1150-1197)



This old song antedates the works of the masters restudied and thus adequately revealed by Johannes Wolf. As a piece of troubadour composition it exemplifies the kind of music written by a nobleman educated in an abbey and composing under the influence of church music, but to secular text with clearly definite rhythm. In it we see some of the earliest specimens of an employment of floridity, which became conventionalized. The expansion of the melody in a decorative design on the words "flor" and "rose" belongs distinctly to the type of vocal art which utilizes floridity to combine external imitation with fanciful suggestion. It is a direct endeavor to employ a grace of music to convey a thought. It is primitive tone painting.

Let us not suppose that this kind of floridity began with the Chatelaine de Coucy (whose music has been quoted), or even with the troubadour body of songsters; but from their day its development in modern vocal composition can be clearly traced, and mayhap some historian, who has yet before him the years needed for the task, will be tempted to follow in its details the march of floridity from this estate of naïve beauty and delineation to its highest elevation and thence downward to its subsequent banality. The present writer is only making note of one or two phases.

Naturally we next turn our eyes to the uses of floridity in the *Ars Nova*. Beauty derived from the exercise of artistic purpose in music is perhaps not so young as historians have asked us to believe. It is incontestable that in the creation of the massive forms of church counterpoint the assembling of the technical materials occupied all the laborers till Josquin de Pres came to his maturity and found the clay ready for his moulding. The first works of imposing beauty in the field of church counterpoint were his; but beauty in vocal music had existed for at least two centuries before his time, and the composers of the *Ars Nova* period show a keen and almost unerring instinct for the employment of the graces and decorative features of song both as elements of pure musical beauty and as means of suggestion or expression.

They preserved the traditions of secular floridity in their musical settings of such words as "fior," "amore," "paradiso," and all the others which had come to be conventionally associated with thrills of ecstasy only to be expressed in a gorgeous exfoliation of the melody. One finds that the verb "cantare" invariably suggests the introduction of a display of vocal technic. Indeed,



the most extraordinary feats of the composers and vocal virtuosi of the baroque opera (late 17th century) or of the post-Handelian decadence could not outdo the achievements of the *Ars Nova*. The vowel, "ah," is already established as the favorable medium of display. Here is a characteristic example from a two-voiced song by Lorenzo, of Florence, a fourteenth century writer. The text is taken from Wolf.

On the other hand there are many passages which prove that these early writers had already begun to disregard textual considerations. They respected conventions and continued them; but where no tradition governed, they wrote florid passages on such words as "per," "un" and even "e."

As already noted, the vowel sound "ah," which was so favorable to the Italian's emission of tone, was almost invariably vocalized at great length. Arteaga, writing in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was astonished because Pasquale Anfossi (1736-1797) in his "Antigone" employed nine measures of 16 notes each, or 144 notes in all, on the second vowel of the word "amato." Yet we have seen Lorenzo four centuries earlier writing eleven and one-half measures in ancient time of three whole notes to the bar on the second vowel of "cantava."

It should be noted at this point that these extended passages were not as long in duration of time as they look to us on paper. The notation of the early period was practised on a large scale. The whole note signifies a much longer tone now than it did in the days when composers set up a time signature of 3. It would probably be correct for us to regard the 3 of Lorenzo as equivalent to our three-fourth or possibly three-eighth measure.* But while this gives a just view of the breath support demanded of these ancient singers, it does not in any way modify our deductions as to the attitude of the composers toward the nature and purpose of the florid passage.

The pages of the composers of the great epoch of polyphonic church music, masters who wrote also secular songs, show no definite aim at florid setting of words or vowels. I have read many hundreds of pages of their scores in the vain effort to discern any organized system in the employment of floridity except that dictated by the immediate demands of the canonic subject. The fluent passages are all essential parts of the musical thought, and their creation seems to be wholly the result of a feeling for the architectural interdependence of the voice parts. In other words,

*For a masterly examination of this matter see "The Interpretation of the Music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries," by Arnold Dolmetsch. London, 1915.

these masters are engaged in making beautiful musical designs with religious expression as the ultimate result. In their art one finds that same combination of decoration with general expression that is to be observed in the church architecture of the period. The expression is never attained by means of delineative detail, but by the sum total of effects, of which most are essentially decorative in character.

Turning to the creations of the early composers of opera, we find that in the first moment floridity is reduced to a minimum. This was inevitable in a movement designed to overthrow the domination of polyphonic complexities. Caccini has told us in no uncertain words that his aims were the obliteration of counterpoint, the liberation of text from the restraints of "passages." Therefore in the stately recitatives of his score and of Peri's we see the ornamental exfoliations, which are very few, placed much as they were in the ecclesiastic music of the time. But in other writings of Caccini, such as the lyrics in his "Nuove Musiche," we find floridity in full bloom and with that complete decorative independence which so soon fell into abuse. Here are two examples of florid writing of the time. The first from the score of Marco da Gagliano's opera, "Dafne" (1608) and the second from the "Nuove Musiche" of Caccini.



The reader will note that the literary character of the vocalized words seemed to have no great weight with these musicians. An examination of the first real masterpiece in the operatic field, the "Orfeo" of Monteverdi, shows that the employment of noble figuration by this master was more dramatic at times. The noble recitatives of the first two acts contain no "passages." The first floridity appears at the opening of Act 3 when *Orfeo* addresses

Charon: "Orfeo son io." And even here floridity is continually employed and with obvious dramatic intent of illustrating Orfeo's personality as a singer. In the well-known ascension of Apollo and Orfeo to heaven comes the often quoted passage for the two voices moving in undulating thirds. Here, of course, the composer was following the antique method of musical delineation by imitation.

It would not be profitable to follow the progress of florid writing through the seventeenth century. The student of musical history is acquainted with the descent of opera from the lofty Hellenic plane on which it stood in its infancy to the low baroque level of the Venetian virtuoso period. In the years just before the revelation of Alessandro Scarlatti's genius the opera was merely a field for the exhibition of voice acrobatics, and hence floridity lost every shred of expression and even of true decorative beauty it ever possessed. From this time forward its claims to artistic recognition have been difficult to establish. Despite Mozart's triumphant demonstration of its utility in characterization (as in the instance of the Queen of the Night) the pale spectre of Rossini's "Semiramide" stalks before the public memory. It is discouraging even to invite attention to the dramatic purpose of Ambroise Thomas in his Ophelie's "mad scene," since the number survives only as a concert medium for a coloratura soprano's glorification. Even the other familiar "mad scene," that of Lucia, has some significance; but the world receives it as a mere piece of bravura.

In a paper on the art of the early English church composers read before the musical subsection of the Historical Congress in England last summer (1915) the eminent British scholar, W. H. Hadow, pointed out the progress toward free and independent musical expression made by Tallis, Byrd, Whyte and others of their type through the use of extended florid passages. At the same meeting Edward J. Dent, the distinguished Cambridge authority, read a paper on the influence of the operatic aria on the development of independent instrumental forms. We find him contending that the repeated settings of the same texts, notably those of Metastasio, made the public so familiar with these libretti that the composers felt at liberty to indulge in such musical elaborations as they chose. In effect, they were rendered independent by liberation from the demands of the dramatic situation.

Whatever conclusion we may form as to the precise application of these and various other reflections on the musical ideals

of the earlier times, we cannot fail to perceive that every critical student has been impressed by the evidences of a desire for expressiveness in designs too often described as purely decorative. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere between extremes. Every musician who has possessed a modicum of creative power has sought to make musical design, whether in its larger architectural expansions or in its infinite range of decorative details, a medium for the publication of his ideals.

In the age—if there ever was such an age—when absolute musical beauty without added expression was the aim of composers, the purely decorative elements of the art were but little more in evidence than they were in the beginning, when only a liturgy was in the musician's mind, or to-day when the most gorgeous colors of the orchestral palette are marshalled to make a sketch of the afternoon of a faun or a baby's ride in a perambulator. Floridity, the arabesque of melody, goes further than its counterpart in architecture, because it rests upon a musical principle, which was recognized even in the darkness before the dawn of lyric art. It is much wiser to admit its value and take advantage of its artistic utility than to endeavor to abolish it because its employment has at times been both extravagant and futile.